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EDUCATORS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: The new millennium heralds great challenges to all societies and economies, particularly in terms of the impact of globalisation, the rapid pace of technological development and the inevitable changes that will occur. Good educators have always been highly regarded as opinion leaders and thus instruments or agents of change. This role will be even more critical in the 21st century.

Dato Professor Ghazali Othman, President of the Malaysian Educational Research Association; Associate Professor Agnes Chang, President of the Educational Research Association, Singapore; Distinguished Speakers, Participants and Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is indeed an honour and my pleasure to be here among such a distinguished gathering of professional educators who collectively and individually, hold our future in your hands.

This joint MERA-ERA Conference is testimony to the spirit of sharing that is espoused by educators the world over. I congratulate you for this noble effort.

This morning, I hope to share with you some thoughts on the directions I see the general trend in education is moving as we enter into the new millennium.

When I went to school at the midpoint of the 20th Century, the teacher or educator was an all powerful guru and know-all! Nobody (least of all a tiny elementary school kid) dared to challenge or question the wisdom of the DIDACTOR! It was accepted (particularly in our Asian context) that the teacher taught and the student studied or imbibed knowledge from the walking encyclopaedia.

This system worked well because education was a privilege then to a privileged few and teachers were the most educated among them. Hence the teacher was much respected and obeyed. In that era of the 50s to 60s, few jobs in this part of the world required specialised skills and knowledge and an “education for survival” paradigm served us well.

From the 70s onwards, Asian countries began to industrialise, moving away from their largely agrarian base. The newly created jobs required workers who were sufficiently educated to read manuals and follow instructions on the mechanised factory floor or in routine “white collar” work. Hence school curricula could be formulated and assessment standardised, without the need for significant changes over long periods of time until new technologies were developed or adopted. Schools could churn out graduates under an “efficiency-driven” system which only required refining of the curricula and assessment. The school products fitted well into the workforce. As long as the workers were told what to do or what the problems were, they could solve problems, refine work practices, improve and increase the productivity of the workplace.

Then came the 90s, when the corporate world and national economies began to realise that new technologies were no longer arising intermittently anymore but in quantum leaps and at ever increasing rates. What we have been witnessing this past decade is the trend towards an intensely competitive, global economy in a fast changing world and the rapid pace of technological change is being reflected in as well as influencing changes to our social life, values and work habits.

How do we prepare ourselves for this kind of future? “Education and training are central to how nations will fare in the future” said the Prime Minister of Singapore at the 7th International Thinking Conference in 1997.

Thus the workforce of the 21st Century will require creative and critical thinkers, change-adept individuals, innovative and science and technology (S&T) savvy workers and life-long learners. We would have to learn, unlearn and relearn or we could be the illiterate of the future (Alvin Toffler). The new global economy has thus been called the knowledge based economy (KBE) as the worker in a KBE is expected to acquire, assimilate and apply new knowledge and skills!

Educators must not only prepare students with knowledge and skills but also with change competencies. Why? If nothing else, to prepare them for a business climate of non-stop change. How well anyone accepts and adapts to the changes will impact workplace morale, productivity, team-building and realisation of company/organisational goals. Yet this task is herculean. The only person who probably welcomes change readily is a wet baby.

Put another way, I would like to tell you a story I read on the internet. This concerns the life cycle of an American Institution. The analogy of the Old West was used. In the “pioneering phase” of a start-up organisation, taking risks is a common experience. Everyday you “bet the farm” as you press boldly into unknown territory. You’re making it up as you go along. But once your dream becomes reality, you enter the “homesteading phase”. Taking risks is carefully avoided. You build a fence and defend your hard-won territory. And you have unwittingly signed the death warrant for your institution. It won’t die immediately, but the seeds of death are in the soil and in time you will experience the “dying phase”. As an institution dies, the “glory days” become a dim nostalgic memory. Vitality ebbs away; productivity drops; finally, one day, you lock the doors. This “life cycle” is virtually inevitable unless the organisation has leadership with the wisdom to initiate new pioneering ventures at appropriate intervals. In other words, educational institutions must change or die.

What is expected of the educator as leader of change or change agent? He/She must be skilled not only in managing the events of change but in leading his staff and students through transitions – the human psychological adjustments that are essential (such as denial, anger, grieving, understanding (rational) and acceptance) if the change is to bring positive results. He must help others adjust to organisational and personal habits changes.

How does one go about being a change agent? What are the things, outcomes, processes, skills, etc which need to be changed? Dolence & Norris in 1995 provided a comparison of the paradigm shift in learning processes and outcomes as we move from the industrial (20th Century) age to the information and knowledge (21st Century) age.

Learning Processes And Outcomes

Industrial Age (20th Century)

Emphasis on skills and tasks
 Linear thinking
 Four-year college degree
 Memorization
 MIS
 Emphasis on the Classics
 Textbooks dictated
 Teacher-centred
 Command and control
 Top-down Management
 Managers/teachers
 Books/libraries
 Rules and order
 Need to know information
 Fixed set of data
 Classrooms, libraries and laboratories
 Teaching environment
 Seat time-based education
 Information acquisition
 Distance education
 Time out for learning
 Separation of learners and learning systems

Information & Knowledge Age (21st Century)

Emphasis on processes and outcomes
 Non-linear thinking
 Lifelong learning
 Bloom's Taxonomy: Analysis
 Knowledge Management Processes
 Just in time learning
 Select information and build own textbook
 Learner-centred
 Sense and respond
 Participative Leadership
 Leaders/facilitators
 Information brokers
 Chaos theory
 Information/accountability/ authority
 Problem solving and synthesis
 Network
 Learning environment
 Achievement-based learning
 Knowledge navigation
 Distance-free learning
 Fusion of learning and work
 Fusion of learning systems

After Michael G. Dolence and Donald M. Norris, 1995

After glancing at the above table, some of us may still not be convinced of the need for a paradigm shift. It is only natural that our inclination is to continue with what we are doing best right now since “if it ain’t broke, why fix it”! We may thus fight or resist change and even when we accept that change is inevitable, we may not make sufficient preparation for the change.

Let me cite two examples to illustrate how the human mind cannot imagine or anticipate future changes.

In the 1890s, the famous scientist Lord Kelvin said “Heavier than air flying machines are impossible”. He was proven wrong within a decade.

In 1977, Ken Olson, the founder of Digital Equipment said “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in his house”.

I shall also share another two examples to illustrate why we cannot in many instances anticipate or envisage the rapidity of change.

It took 50 years for electricity to reach the homes of 50 million people. Television took 16 years to reach the homes of 50 million people. It required just 4 years in the case of the Internet.

As educators, we deal in knowledge. This doubled between 1900 and 1950; doubled again between 1950 and 1960; quadrupled between 1960 and 1980; quadrupled in the 1980s and some believe may increase up to 10-fold in the 1990s.

From the examples which illustrate the inevitability and fast rate of change, it seems obvious that educational leaders have to lead their team members to embrace and adjust to the changes. What do these change competencies entail?

The leader must have a clear vision of where he expects his institution and team members should be heading, set clear goals and implementation plans, communicate these to all and be personally committed so as to build trust and confidence among all the members. The message that has to be unmistakably clear is that change is not an option. Everyone involved has to be committed to and take ownership of the change.

This can come about only if there is a conviction that the change will bring benefits to the team either in tangible (e.g. monetary, reward, career advancement, respect) or intangible ways (e.g. self-esteem, empowerment).

Thus, we see that decision-making, communicating, learning, accountability, action and follow-up are essential ingredients of the change process.

However, there is one serious challenge change-agents face – that of negative feedback. There are those who hope you fail in your quest. This is only natural as the process of change is always political. How does one educate cynical and critical senior colleagues and peers?

The Professor and Dean, College of Engineering, University of Washington (Denice Denton) who became a change-agent as a result of gender imbalance in her College (250 men to 1 woman) had this to say about the above.

“The history of my career in its early stages illustrates more clearly than I would like, these pitfalls. There were lots of misunderstandings; I had to go outside the department and college to find female colleagues. I was denied access (physically and metaphysically) to power centres within the department. The locks to a facility crucial to my research were changed.”

But I learned to choose my battles; I learned to go beyond departmental colleagues and the college. I also learned to stay centred, to keep focusing on what was important to me; finally, I learned to ignore lots of negative feedback, but to be reasonable enough to be able to sift the positive from the negative. The keys, I think, were the ability to *identify allies* – wherever they might be; to be *politically aware* and to learn *how to work collaboratively*. I also learned to connect my work as a change agent to my work as a scholar – I did not forget my disciplinary home. I also became aware of the *importance of keying into national efforts in regard to transforming educational programs*. I began to understand how *critical* it was to *have fun*, and not to obsess about tenure and departmental politics – there is a life beyond. You in this room may or may not have tenure now. You still have the opportunity to be a leader – perhaps to change the system”.

Another piece of advice comes from Dr Rick Olguin, a college teacher. He wrote:

“As a consultant to other colleges working on issues of (ethnic) diversity, I have learned that in order for committed teachers – who may also be effective and influential researchers – to help change institutions so they can effectively educate increasingly diverse student bodies, *they must look beyond the confines of their own classroom walls*. They must be *much more*

conscious of the ways in which their work as teachers fits into the larger structures and missions of their institutions.”

The divisions of labour in higher education – those that so *firmly divide teachers from researchers from student affairs specialist* (read: from administrators) must be broken down. Only then will we be able to create communities where diverse groups of people can learn and grow together”.

In other words, the educator in the new millennium must be even more proactive in seeking out the big picture if he/she is to play his primary role effectively.

In conclusion, the educator as change agent will be called upon to play this role repeatedly as learning to live with dynamic change is one of the primary skills of the future. The successful institution or individual will be one which persists in retooling, retraining and repositioning in order to stay ahead of the competition.